

5-9-2011

Developing Global Citizens: The Effects of Semester Study Abroad on Roger Williams University Students

Kevin Danaher

Roger Williams University, kdanaher962@g.rwu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://docs.rwu.edu/honors_theses



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Danaher, Kevin, "Developing Global Citizens: The Effects of Semester Study Abroad on Roger Williams University Students" (2011). *Honors Theses*. Paper 11.
http://docs.rwu.edu/honors_theses/11

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the RWU Theses at DOCS@RWU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of DOCS@RWU. For more information, please contact mwu@rwu.edu.

Developing Global Citizens:
The Effects of Semester Study Abroad on Roger Williams University Students
Kevin Danaher
Roger Williams University
Honors Program
May 6, 2011

Abstract

Study abroad at Roger Williams University allows students to travel to new locations and pursue personal and intercultural development opportunities. This thesis describes a research study that investigated: *How does the study abroad experience influence students' academic, intercultural, and personal development?* 28 RWU participants answered survey questions about their semester abroad experiences. Results suggest that a study abroad semester has many positive influences on a college student's personal life and intercultural development.

Introduction

The study abroad experience has become more and more popular over the last decade. The ease of travel and global communication has made study in world-wide locations easier and more accessible to the average college student. The personal growth and knowledge gained while participating students are abroad is unparalleled to any other college experience. This study examined the impact of semester long study abroad on participating students' academic, intercultural and personal development.

Theoretical Framework

William Hoffa, a study abroad advisor at Amherst College, suggests the study abroad experience as "a way for youthful travelers to hear unfamiliar languages, and see ancient and modern architecture; to get firsthand knowledge of geography; and to learn about the politics, culture, art and antiquities of the continent." (as cited in Schawrz, 2007) Today, most students who attend college have the opportunity to spend time studying abroad. This can range from one-two weeks abroad, to semester long programs, and even to yearlong programs. However, as Opem & Ruhter McMillan (2004) found, no matter where or how long students study abroad, the impact of their experience will affect the rest of their lives.

The effects of the study abroad experience are far reaching and go beyond what Mr. Hoffa's traditional view suggests. It also allows students to forge global perspectives. The Institute of the International Education of Students (2002) found that 82% of study abroad participants from 1960 to 1999 believed that their experiences abroad helped them develop more sophisticated ways of looking at the world. Fry (1984) suggests that students studying

Running Head: Developing Global Citizens

abroad can gain access to a wide variety of ideological perspectives on major issues that can help to foster a peaceful global community.

The study abroad experience for participating students has a profound impact on their lives. Dwyer & Peters (2004) found that the long-term impact on participating student's personal, academic and professional life positively impacts a student's career path, world-view and self-confidence. As First Lady, Michelle Obama (2011) stated, "When you study abroad, you make America stronger." She further suggests that one of the best ways for college students to prepare for the global marketplace is by venturing abroad and using these experiences beyond our borders to gain new perspectives. Opem & Ruhter McMillan (2004) found that students who study abroad gain a unique set of skills that distinguish them as future world-leaders – leaders that navigate effectively, humanely and positively across many cultures.

Research Question

How does the study abroad experience influence students' academic, intercultural, and personal development?

Setting and Participants

The setting for this study was Roger Williams University. Participants were chosen by a list of students provided by the Spiegel Center for Global and International Programs at Roger Williams University. Sixty (60) students who studied abroad for a full semester during the spring semester of 2010 and the spring semester of 2009 were asked to participate in the study. Of the 60 students, 47%, or a total of 28 students voluntarily participated.

Procedures

The effects of study abroad on participating students' academic, intercultural and personal development were characterized using a survey (see Appendix A) that was created for the purpose of this study. First, The Human Subject Review Board at Roger Williams University approved the study on the assurance of confidentiality, and then the survey was sent through email to 60 Roger Williams University students who completed a semester of study abroad in February of 2011.

The surveys were completed and all data collection ended on February 21, 2011. The survey had questions based in three main categories: academic development, intercultural development and personal development. Within each category, participants were asked to gauge how their study abroad experiences affected them personally, using a scale (strongly disagree, disagree, indifferent, agree, and strongly agree). In addition, an open ended question was proposed to find out which area: academic, intercultural or personal, was most important to them and why. The quantitative data were analyzed and charted by percentage. The qualitative data (one question) were analyzed by looking for trends in the data.

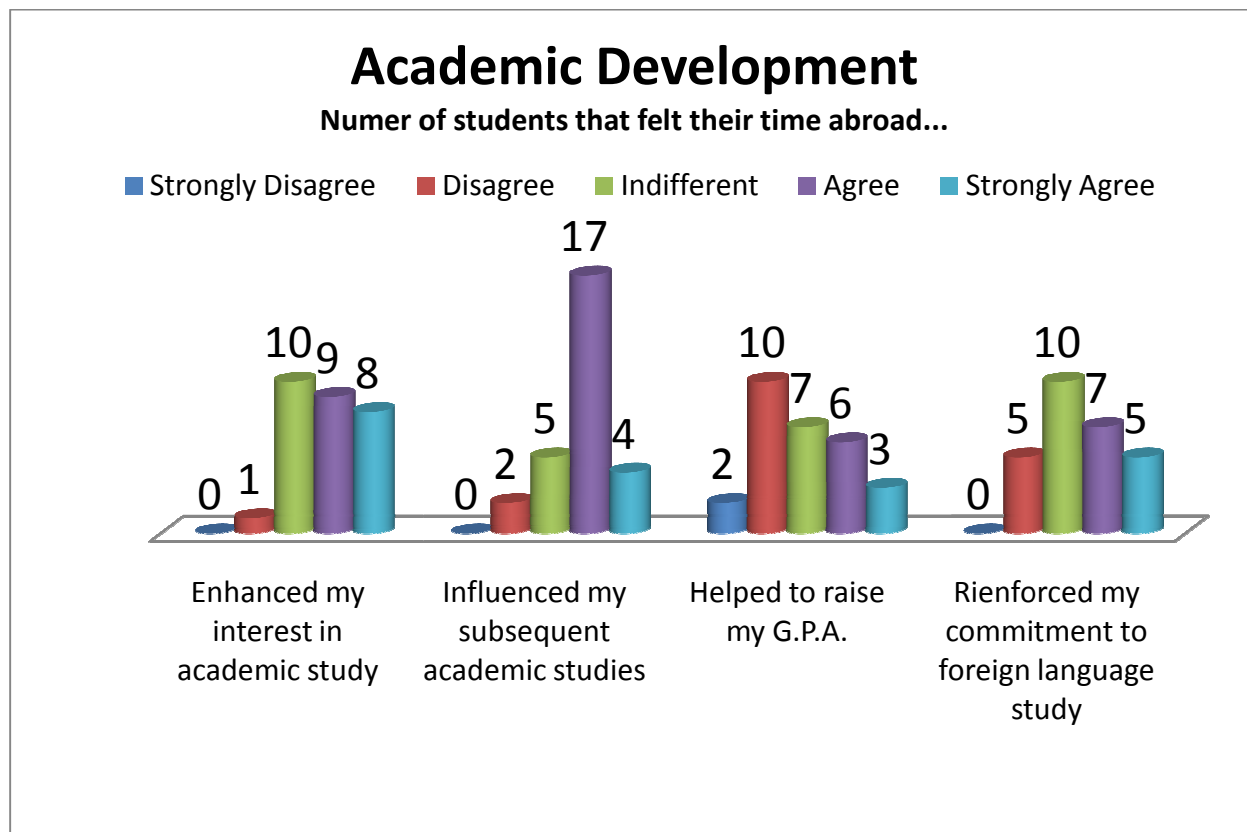
Results

Results 1: Location of Study Abroad

Of the 28 students that completed the survey, 25 students studied abroad in Europe, about 89% of the participants, and three students studied abroad in Oceania, about 11%.

Results 2: Academic Development

In the area of Academic Development, data were gathered in 4 subcategories. See Table 1 below for results.



Looking specifically at one statement, the number of students that felt their time abroad helped to raise their grade point average (G.P.A.), two participants strongly disagreed with this statement, only 7%, and an additional ten disagreed as well, to make up 36%. The number of students who felt that their time abroad neither helped nor hurt their G.P.A. was 7 participants, or 25%. In total, the number of students who claimed that their time abroad either did not help to raise their G.P.A. or did not affect their academic work made up for 68% of participants.

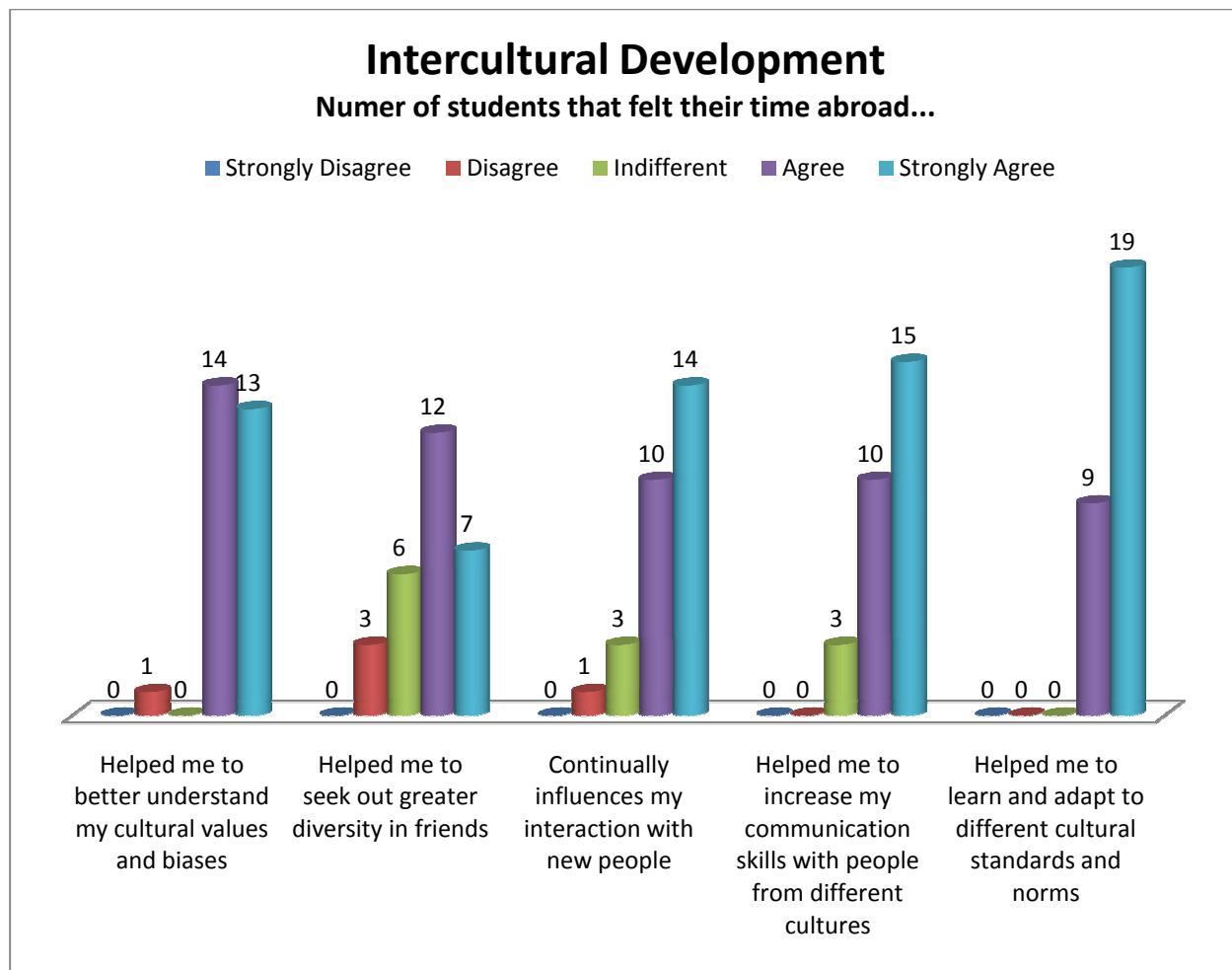
Although the time abroad may not have helped students raise their G.P.A., 21 participants (75%) either agreed or strongly agreed that their time abroad did influence their

subsequent academic studies. 61% of respondents (17 participants) claimed that their study abroad experience enhanced their interest in academic studies. Both of these numbers suggest that study abroad is still a good way to influence students and their academic interests; however, it is not necessarily an accurate benchmark of their performance in the classroom, since many students' G.P.A. was not affected positively.

The last statement for participant's academic development dealt with how many students felt that the study abroad experience helped to reinforce their commitment to foreign language study. Only 12 students, or 43%, believed that studying abroad helped to reinforce their commitment to study a foreign language. These numbers could be somewhat imprecise because students studying in Oceania and parts of Europe spoke English. These participants could have responded that they were indifferent or disagreed with this statement.

Results 3: Intercultural Development

The original belief behind study abroad is that when a student travels to another country, he/she is immersed in that particular culture and learns about that culture. See Table 2, Intercultural Development for results in this category.



Out of every student at Roger Williams University who participated in the study abroad survey, 32% claimed that they agreed and 68% stated they strongly agreed that their time abroad helped them to learn and adapt to different cultural standards and norms. Students who studied abroad also claimed that their time abroad helped to increase their communication skills with people from different cultures, with 89%, or 25 participants, either agreeing or strongly agreeing.

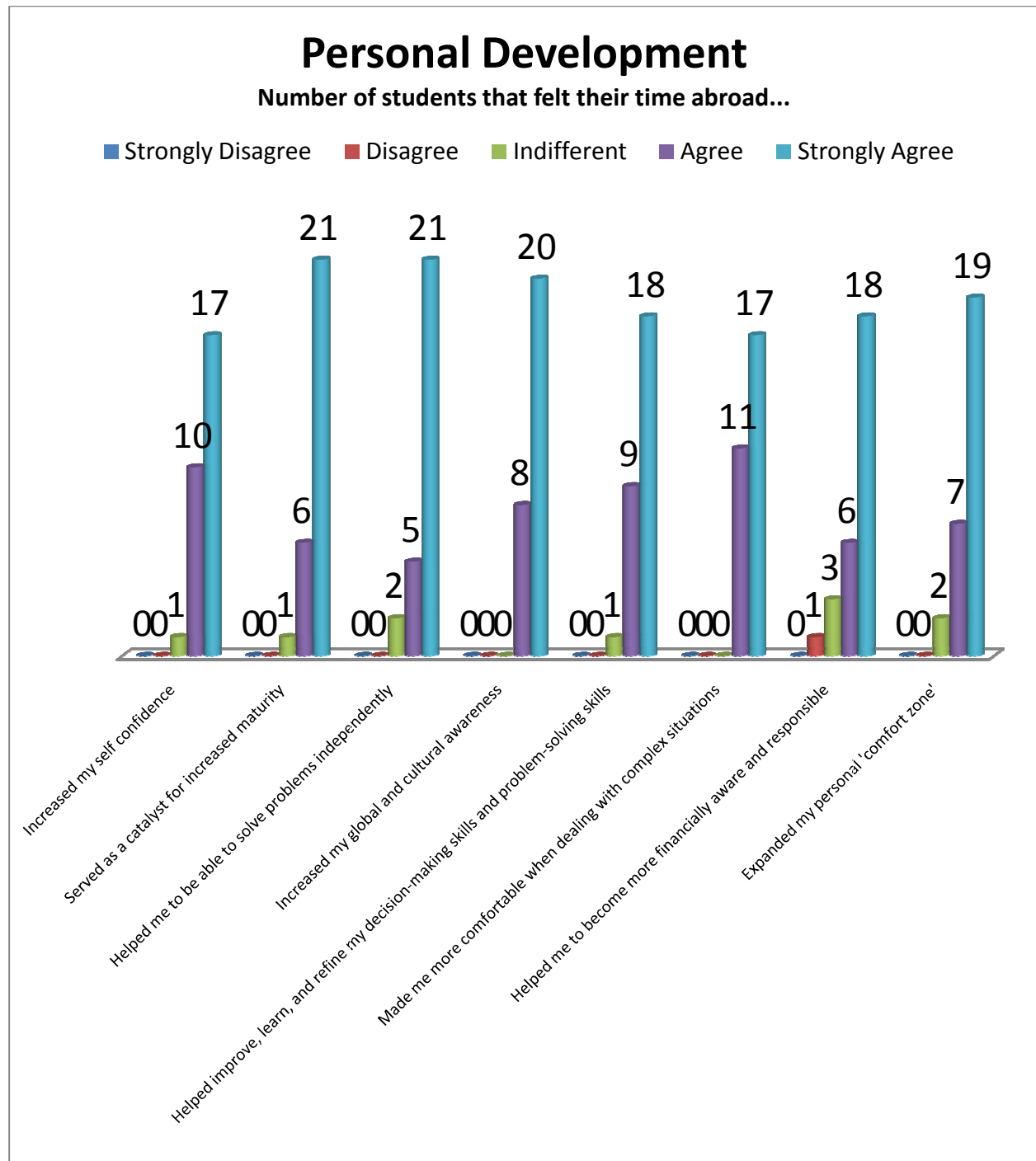
Participants were also asked how the study abroad experience helped to change their beliefs and interactions with people they know and meet. In this subcategory, 68% strongly agreed and agreed that their time abroad helped them to seek out greater diversity in friends,

while 86% agreed or strongly agreed that their experience abroad continually influences their interactions with new people.

A strong majority of participants, specifically 96%, agreed and strongly agreed that their time abroad helped them to better understand their own cultural values and beliefs. Students who go abroad today are continually finding themselves learning not only about the culture and area that they are immersed in, but also about themselves.

Results 4: Personal Development

Participants suggested that personal development was the greatest area of growth as a result of studying abroad. See Table 3, Personal Development.



Students were asked if their time abroad increased their self confidence, and a majority, 61%, strongly agreed with this, while another 36% agreed. Overall, of the 28 participants surveyed, 97% felt that their time abroad increased their self confidence. The next area that was examined was the number of students that felt their time abroad served as a catalyst for

increased maturity. Of the 28 participants, 75% strongly agreed that their time abroad served as a catalyst for increased maturity, while another 22% agreed with this statement as well, again with 97% of the participants supporting this personal growth. Continuing this trend, 75% of the participants strongly agreed and 18% agreed that their time abroad helped them to solve problems independently (93% overall).

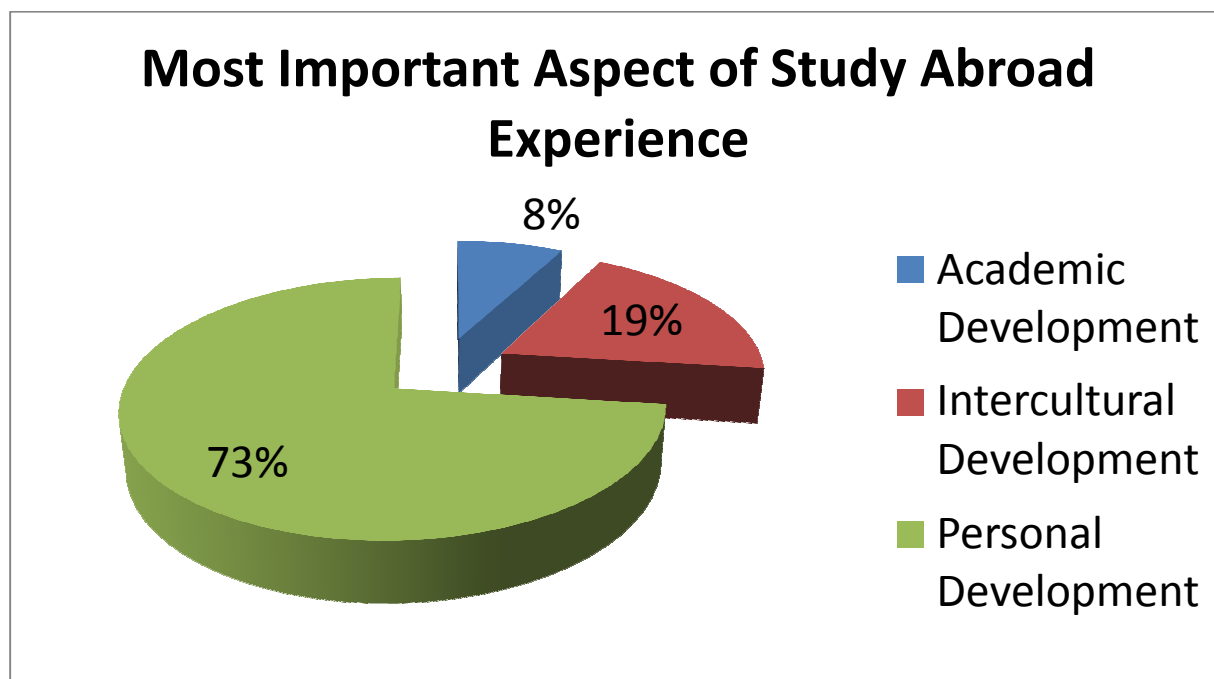
Students who felt that they increased their ability to solve problems independently, also showed a strong majority, 97% agreed or strongly agreed, that their time abroad helped them to improve, learn, and refine their decision-making skills and problem-solving skills. All of these skills combined add to independent problem solving.

The next area of personal development that was examined was economics. 86% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that their time abroad helped them become more financially aware and responsible. This is not to say that students were not financially aware and responsible before they went abroad, but the fact that most students had to budget and deal with foreign currencies on a regular basis helped raise their awareness and responsibility.

Students studying abroad are constantly put into unfamiliar surroundings and circumstances. Out of the 28 participants, 26 students, or 93%, felt that their time abroad helped to expand their personal 'comfort zone'. This high number suggests that students were able to explore and do new things and learn from these experiences. Also, 100% of the students agreed or strongly agreed that their study abroad experience made them more comfortable when dealing with complex life situations. Finally, the participants, all 28, agreed or strongly agreed that their time abroad helped them to increase their global and cultural awareness.

Results 5: Greatest Area of Development

Participants claimed that the area of development that was most significantly affected was their own personal development, followed by intercultural development and lastly, academic development. See Table 4, Most Important Aspect of Study Abroad Experience.



Students who claimed that the most important aspect of their study abroad experience was their academic growth felt their time abroad helped them to experience different aspects of the business world. One participant claimed that “business is conducted differently in different countries and being abroad not only helped me to realize this but also to learn how each country conducts business differently.” Another participant suggested that the reason why academic development was the most important was because they were able to take classes that Roger Williams University does not offer.

Participants who believed that their intercultural development was the most important aspect of their growth during their time abroad made up 19%. One participant claimed “I now

find myself seeking out those from other cultures to try to learn about them and teach them about myself.” This is a positive aspect of studying abroad- interacting with different cultures and teaching and learning from others. Also a participant stated, “I loved learning new cultural norms and was fascinated with the indigenous people of New Zealand... it allowed me to look at issues with another viewpoint instead of the typical American viewpoint.”

Personal development was seen by participants as the most important area of growth during their time abroad. The majority, 73%, felt this way. A participant claimed that:

“My semester abroad helped me to mature and become more independent at a much faster rate than any other experience I have had so far. I feel that as a result of studying abroad, I continue to grow and learn more about myself and the world every day.”

Some participants simply responded by claiming, “I came back a whole new person.” Another participant claimed that he/she was, “forced to learn how to live in a different way than normal so I had to be bold and learn new ways of achieving what I wanted.” Students being forced to live outside of their ‘normal’ way of life have to step away from people they have been living with their whole lives. As one student said, “I’ve never had to spend so much time away from my friends and family. This made me grow into being more independent and more confident.”

Conclusions

The Roger Williams University Education (Mission & Core Values) strives to educate all students to become productive citizens of the social and professional communities in which they will live and build their careers. The study abroad experience helps to develop these productive citizens at an accelerated rate through semester long programs at Roger Williams University.

Participants suggested that as a result of study abroad, they experienced more self-confidence, a greater comfort zone, and increased maturity. This personal growth in conjunction with the intercultural and academic growth has the potential of making the semester abroad one of the most intellectually productive semesters in a college career. As Ruhter Mcmillian & Opem (2004) suggest, no matter where or how long students study abroad, the impact of their experience will affect the rest of their lives. As one participant claimed, "Once you know who you are, you are motivated to develop in other ways."

In sum, the knowledge gained and lessons learned by students spending a semester abroad enhance the college experience and the students' personal growth in multiple ways. Perhaps this was best said by a study participant:

"I loved that studying abroad forced us to step outside of our comfort zones and really grow as people. Coming back to RWU, I can see a difference in people who studied abroad in Europe compared to those who did not. It was a learning and developing experience that would not have been possible anywhere else."

Running Head: Developing Global Citizens

Appendix A

[SURVEY PREVIEW MODE] Study Abroad Survey - Google Chrome
www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?PREVIEW_MODE=DO_NOT_USE_THIS_LINK_FOR_COLLECTION&sm=WATFuwvCkCj2CF0/V9VTRu8Us9gn4SLivPD28bs0%3d

Study Abroad [Exit this survey](#)

1. Benefits of Study Abroad experience for students at RWU participating in semester long programs

This survey is part of a student-led research study designed to analyze the benefits of a semester long study abroad program on participating students' personal, academic, and intercultural development. By participating in this study, you are providing informed consent to me, the researcher, to use the data collected to form conclusions about the effects of long term study abroad programs offered through RWU.

Participation in this survey is strictly voluntary. You have the right to decline participation. If you do participate, your confidentiality is assured.

There are no physical, psychological, or emotional risks associated with this study. A potential benefit is that you might have a better understanding of the effects of your experiences abroad.

If you have any questions about this survey, please contact me, Kevin Danaher, RWU student, at kdanaher962@g.rwu.edu or my thesis advisor, Dr. Susan Pasquarelli, at spasquarelli@rwu.edu

1. Where did you study abroad?

☐ Africa

☐ Asia

☐ Central America

☐ Europe

☐ Oceania

☐ South America

[Next](#)

Powered by SurveyMonkey

[SURVEY PREVIEW MODE] Study Abroad Survey - Google Chrome
www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?PREVIEW_MODE=DO_NOT_USE_THIS_LINK_FOR_COLLECTION&sm=WATFuwvCkCj2CF0/V9VTRu8Us9gn4SLivPD28bs0%3d

Study Abroad [Exit this survey](#)

2.

The following questions are designed to gauge the LONG TERM effects of your study abroad experience. I am interested in knowing how the study abroad program influenced your academic, personal, and intercultural growth after your semester abroad.

1. Intercultural Development

My time abroad...

	strongly disagree	disagree	indifferent	agree	strongly agree
Helped me to better understand my cultural values and biases	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Helped me to seek out greater diversity in friends	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Continually influences my interaction with new people	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Helped me to increase my communication skills with people from different cultures	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Helped me to learn and adapt to different cultural standards and norms	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

2. Academic Development

My time abroad...

	strongly disagree	disagree	indifferent	agree	strongly agree
Enhanced my interest in academic study	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Influenced my subsequent academic studies	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Helped to raise my G.P.A.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Reinforced my commitment to foreign language study	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Running Head: Developing Global Citizens

Appendix A (cont.)

[SURVEY PREVIEW MODE] Study Abroad Survey - Google Chrome
 www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?PREVIEW_MODE=DO_NOT_USE_THIS_LINK_FOR_COLLECTION&sm=WATFuvwCkchjq2CF0/VV9VTRu8Usggn4SLivPD2Bbs0%3d
 language study

3. Personal Development

My time abroad...

	strongly disagree	disagree	indifferent	agree	strongly agree
Increased my self confidence	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Served as a catalyst for increased maturity	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Helped me to be able to solve problems independently	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Increased my global and cultural awareness	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Helped improve, learn, and refine my decision-making skills and problem-solving skills	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Made me more comfortable when dealing with complex situations	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Helped me to become more financially aware and responsible	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Expanded my personal 'comfort zone'	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

4. Which aspect of your study abroad experience was most important to you (Personal Development, Academic Development, or Intercultural Development) and why?

5. Would you study abroad again if you could?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Prev Done

Powered by SurveyMonkey

References

Dwyer, M.M., & Peters, C.K. (2004, May 1). The Benefits of Study Abroad. *Transitions Abroad*.

Retrieved April 02, 2011, From

https://www.iesabroad.org/IES/About_IES/IES_News/Articles/newsArticle0010.html

Fry, G.W. (1984). The Economic and Political Impact of Study Abroad. *Comparative and International Education Society*, 203-220.

Gillespie, J., & Slawson, C. (2002). *IES Outcomes Assessment Project 2002* (Rep.). Institute for the International Education of Students.

Obama, M. (2011, January 19). *100000 Strong Initiative*. Speech presented in Howard University, Washington D.C.

Roger Williams University. (2011) Mission & Core Values. *Roger Williams University*. Retrieved April 02, 2011, from <http://www.rwu.edu/about/mission/>

Ruhter Mcmillian, A., & Opem, G. (2004). Study Abroad: A Lifetime of Benefits. *Abroad View*.

Schwarz, S. (2007). *A History of Study Abroad*. *Transitions Abroad*. Retrieved May 1 2011 , from http://www.transitionsabroad.com/publications/studyabroadmagazine/2007Spring/a_history_of_study_abroad.shtml

The London School of Economics and Political Science. (n.d.). The Benefits of a Year Abroad. *The General Course*. Retrieved April 2, 2011, from http://www.2.1.lse.ac.uk/study/generalCourse/PDF/the_benefits_of_a_year_abroad.pdf.